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Ancestry and Brief Biography

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THE REVEREND AMZI FRANCIS

(1793—1845)

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Ancestry and Brief Biography of THE REVEREND AMZI FRANCIS (1793—1845)

The little company of God-fearing men who came over from England to Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts and finally settled in and near Hartford, Connecticut, during the second quarter of the seventeenth century, produced a type of descendants which is not quite matched either in this country or abroad. This type exemplifies much that is best in American tradition and achievement; without it, indeed, such tradition could not have flowered.

While the fundamental pattern remained the same—a pattern which may best be summed up in the word Conscience—the individual achievement was along two distinct but parallel lines: the material and the spiritual. Yet it was implicit of the type itself that the one sort was far from materialistic, and that the spirituality of the other was not mere spiritualism.

A shining example of the second category was the Reverend Amzi Francis, who was pastor of the Presbyterian Church at Bridgehampton, Long Island, from 1823 to 1845. He was born in West Hartford, Connecticut, July 31, 1793 (1794 Old Style) the son of Roger and Elizabeth (Andrews) Francis. His ancestry in the direct line traces back to Robert Francis, who settled in Wethersfield, Connecticut, before 1656, having been granted lands by the town authorities in that year.

According to competent sources, Robert Francis came over from Staffordshire, England, with his brother Richard, about 1645. The Francis family was an old and illustrous one, Sir Philip Francis being the best-known example. The Staffordshire branch had for its coat of arms: Crest—out of a ducal coronet a demi-eagle displayed; coronet of or, eagle of gules. Shield—on a field argent a chevron gules, three eagles displayed. Motto—*"Ou le sort appelle,"* "Whither fate calls." The signifi-

cance and appropriateness of this motto is noteworthy, in view of the outstanding trait which the family has displayed in each succeeding generation—wholehearted devotion to duty under whatever circumstances Providence may have dictated.

ROBERT Francis was born in 1623, and in the course of his long life was deemed a substantial and influential member of the community. He was granted additional lands in 1660, and was Surveyor of Highways in 1671 and 1672. He died January 2, 1711. His son:

JOHN Francis was born September 4, 1658. He held many important offices, being successively "Fence Viewer," Surveyor of Highways, and Constable. He was a Sergeant in the Colonial Army. In December, 1701, he was appointed Collector of the School Rate, etc. He married (second) Mercy Chittenden, July 16, 1683. She was born in 1662 and died October 13, 1745. Their fifth child:

THOMAS Francis, born February 4, 1690, removed to Newington, Connecticut, where he died April 26, 1774. He was known as "Sergeant" Thomas Francis, and was active in public and religious work, being often mentioned in the town records as serving on church and school committees. His first wife was Abigail, daughter of Jacob Griswold, whom he married March 9, 1718. She died February 8, 1752. By her, his second son:

JOSIAH Francis was born at Newington, September 18, 1722; died there November 10, 1798. He was Collector of the School and Minister's Rates and held other important positions. He married February 26, 1746, Millicent, daughter of Nathaniel and Sarah (Buck) Stoddard. Further details of Stoddard ancestry are given below. She died July 5, 1800. Their seventh child:

ROGER Francis, born at Newington, April 29, 1763, moved to West Hartford, Connecticut, and built the old Francis homestead there. He was mentioned in the town records as a substantial landholder; was "considered wealthy." His second wife was Elizabeth Andrews, whom he married in December, 1790. He died September 6,

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1839, and she died September 1, 1845. AMZI Francis, the subject of this sketch, was their second child.

Through his Stoddard ancestry, noted above, Amzi Francis traced another old and distinguished lineage. The Stoddard family originated in England, its founder, "William Stoddard, knight," being listed as coming over from Normandy in 1066 A. D. with "his cousin" William the Conqueror. One of his descendants was Rukard Stoddard, of Mattingham, Kent, near Elsham, seven miles from London Bridge, who was granted 400 acres, afterwards included in the corporate limits of London. This estate remained in the Stoddard family from the year 1400 until 1765. In the Herald's Office are found the coat of arms of "The Antient (Ancient) Family of Stoddard of London": Sable, three estoiles, and a bordure gules. Crest—out of a ducal coronet a demihors salient, ermine. Motto—*"Festina lente,"* "Make haste slowly."

In direct descent was Anthony Stoddard, who settled in Massachusetts before 1640 and was undoubtedly an elder brother of the John Stoddard mentioned above, the two probably coming to America at the same time.

JOHN Stoddard was listed as holding several parcels of land at Wethersfield, Connecticut, June 18, 1645, having served as Juror in 1642-3. He bore the title of "Sergeant," and was a man of substance and worth, leaving an estate appraised at over 400 pounds sterling—a large sum for those days. He married, about 1642, Mary, daughter of Nathaniel and Elizabeth (Deming) Foote. She was born in England circa 1623. He died at Wethersfield, December, 1664. His seventh child:

NATHANIEL Stoddard I, was born in Wethersfield, March, 1660. His first wife, Mary, died in childbirth January 17, 1693. Their son:

NATHANIEL Stoddard II, was born in Wethersfield on the last mentioned date. He married, September 26, 1728, Sarah Buck, who was born in Wethersfield, March 25, 1701, the daughter of Samuel and Sarah (Butler) Buck. Her mother was the daughter of Deacon Samuel Butler. Nathaniel Stoddard and his wife removed to Newington, Connecticut, some years after their mar-

riage. He died there August 13, 1756. She made her will—disposing of substantial property—October 3, 1757, and died November 4th of that year. Their eldest child:

MILLICENT Stoddard, born June 29, 1729, married, in Wethersfield, September 18, 1747, Josiah FRANCIS; who, as noted above, was the grandfather of Rev. Amzi Francis.

The Francis house in West Hartford was on New Britain Avenue, then known as the South Bend Farmington Road, at the point where Ralph E. Garth and family are now living—probably in the same dwelling, as it dates from the eighteenth century and was formerly the home of Chester Francis, Rev. Amzi's younger brother.

Mr. Francis was graduated from Middlebury College, Vermont, in 1819, as Bachelor of Arts, afterwards receiving the degree of Master of Arts from that institution. After studying at Princeton Theological Seminary, June 30, 1821, to March 7, 1822, he was licensed to preach, June 4, 1822, by the Hartford North Association. He seems to have been called to Long Island almost immediately, for he began preaching at Bridgehampton in September of that same year. On April 17, 1823, he was ordained by the Presbytery of Long Island and formally installed as pastor of the Bridgehampton Presbyterian Church.

"The day previous to his ordination, his examination was sustained by Presbytery at S. Hampton. At his ordination, Rev. Zechariah Greene presided. Rev. Abraham Luce made introductory prayer. Rev. Ezra King preached the sermon. Rev. Lathrop Thompson made the succeeding prayer. Rev. Nathanial Prince gave charge to Candidate, Rev. Samuel Robinson gave charge to people. Rev. Ebenezer Phillips made closing prayer. Mr. Francis was of small stature, nervous temperament; his large, speaking, black eyes denoted intellect and sympathetic action. He was scholarly in appearance, industrious, studious, devout; intensely in earnest; spiritual, logical . . . one of God's own uncomplaining, patient, self-denying saints. The writer herein speaks from living, heart-felt experience and knowledge." — Hon. Henry

Parsons Hedges in Historical Address, Bridgehampton, July 4, 1876.

In view of the improvements which were made during Mr. Francis' ministry, a brief description of the old church as he found it and of the quaint customs which characterized the services therein may be of interest.

The old church edifice was completed April 5, 1737. Its dimensions were 38 x 54 feet. Of heavy timbered construction, it was built to withstand the assault of centuries. Its exterior was of upright boards, closely joined. There was no vestibule. Three doors gave direct access to the church interior, which was unplastered, but ceiled. Smooth-planed posts projected from the interior finish, and from these posts huge curved braces ran to the girders above, thus holding the building firmly together. All were smoothly planed, and aged to a rich natural tone. The ceiling was painted white, with a blue cornice around the outside underneath and above the galleries.

The pulpit in Mr. Francis' days was stained in imitation of mahogany. It was of very peculiar construction. In the center was a semi-circular enclosure for the preacher's use. Ascent was by five rather steep steps, leading to a broader platform on which the minister turned half way around, opened the pulpit door, and went up two more steps to enter the pulpit. The seat inside was a naked board. On top of the pulpit-rail and in front was a dark-coloured cushion with tassels at the corners. Upon the cushion rested a large Bible. Brass candlesticks flanked the cushion on either side, attached to the pulpit-rail.

Behind the pulpit was a window, between two pilasters. From the ceiling above the window hung the sounding-board, an immense, curiously-shaped affair, projecting over the pulpit and secured by iron rods fastened to its outer edge. In front of the pulpit the floor was raised to the level of the first pulpit stair, to accommodate a single pew with two seats—one on either side of a semi-circular enlargement of the pulpit itself.

This pew was called the Deacon's Seat and was occupied by the two deacons, who sat facing and over-

looking the congregation. A board attached by hinges to the paneled front of the Deacon's Seat and normally folded up to a level with the top formed the Communion Table when let down upon braces underneath.

"The Broad Aisle" ran from the front door to the pulpit. One side was for men, the other for women. In the aisles were small seats for children. All the seats were of framed oak timber. From the earliest times, the custom had prevailed of seating the members according to age, the older in front and the younger, by successive graduations, towards the rear; but a few years before Mr. Francis began his ministry, this plan had been abandoned in favor of the usual system of pew rentals.

The gallery stairs were at the front corners of the house, reached by a cross-aisle which cut off three seats occupied by colored people. There were no aisles in the gallery, but the seats were partitioned off to divide the sexes as below. The total seating capacity could not have exceeded three hundred people.

Such was the old edifice which Mr. Francis found, and in which he preached for twenty of the twenty-three years of his ministry. Under that ministry, however, the church grew in membership and importance, and a new building became imperative.

Finally, in 1841, the old building was taken down and on January 17, 1842, the present edifice was completed and dedicated. The last sermon in the old church was preached by Mr. Francis from the text, Leviticus 16:13: And he shall put the incense upon the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is upon the testimony, that he die not.

Great enthusiasm prevailed at the dedication of the new church. It is recorded that fully two thousand persons were in attendance. The new edifice was erected at a cost of $5,493.56—equivalent to about four times the sum under present conditions,—and has been much admired. The Building Committee was fortunate in having among their number Nathan Rogers, the famous artist, who acted as architectural adviser. The other members of the committee were: Alfred Pierson, Henry White, Hugh

Halsey, David and Luther Halsey. The trustees were: Richard Halsey, Sullivan Cook and James H. Topping.

The Presbyterian parsonage at Bridgehampton, L. I., occupied by the Rev. Amzi Francis during his ministry there, stood on a twenty-acre lot a short distance back from Ocean Road, laid out for parsonage purposes in 1712. The original dwelling was doubtless a somewhat humble affair. About 1825, Mr. Francis built on the site a double two-story brick house, fronting south, which was occupied by him during the remaining twenty years of his ministry and by his successors for a like period thereafter. The property was later occupied by a Mrs. Kahle. The house must have been of very substantial construction, as when it was torn down in 1886 the bricks were used for the foundation of the present dwelling on the property.

By his first wife, who was Eliza Talcott, Mr. Francis had one son, Roger Francis, who became a substantial and respected citizen of Bridgehampton. She died in 1830.

On February 15, 1832, Mr. Francis married Mary L. Hedges, whose family had long been identified with the welfare of church and civic affairs at Bridgehampton and vicinity. By her he had four children:

1. Ann Eliza, b. Nov. 3, 1824; d. Oct. 26, 1836.
2. Mary Amelia, b. Oct. 30, 1826; died young.
3. Samuel Talcott, b. Oct. 3, 1839; died March, 1841.
4. Henrietta Elizabeth, b. June 23, 1842; married James TALCOTT, of New York City (formerly of Hartford, Conn.). Children of James and Henrietta Elizabeth (Francis) Talcott: James Frederick Talcott; Arthur Whiting, Francis E., Grace (Mrs. Warner Van Norden), and Edith Talcott (Mrs. William H. Travell).

A bronze tablet in memory of the Rev. Amzi Francis, the gift of James Frederick Talcott, was erected in Bridgehampton and unveiled in 1933.

Mr. Francis preached his last sermon on Sunday, October 5, 1845, from the text: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord: my soul shall be joyful to my God"—Isaiah 6:10. The selection was peculiarly apt, in view of the valiant attitude which Mr. Francis had displayed throughout his busy and useful life; and especially considering the

great cause for grief which overwhelmed him at that moment, due to the recent loss of his mother. If he already sensed the nearness of that call by which he was to follow her, his choice of the text showed that such foretaste did not dim in the slightest the joy with which he served his Master.

The following Tuesday, October seventh, Mr. Francis officiated at the funeral of a Mrs. Adeline Rose, and it is recorded that he seemed ill when he performed the service. He literally died in the harness, for he passed away only ten days later, October 18, 1845, and was buried at 2:00 p. m., October twentieth.

Though a comparatively young man—he died in his fifty-third year—Mr. Francis had accomplished much, within the quiet sphere to which Providence had assigned him. The church had grown in membership and influence. The dream of his life, the new church edifice, was completed and dedicated, and stands today, in the language of an eminent writer, "A monument to the man." But the most enduring monument to Amzi Francis is in the hearts of his congregation and their children's children, today and for many years to come.

PARTIAL LIST OF AUTHORITIES CONSULTED

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